

Wisconsin Folks: Masters of Tradition



Elena Greendeer, born in Black River Falls in 1948, has sewn and beaded since age 10, learning the basics of both from her mother, Bertha Blackdeer. While living in Wisconsin Dells, Bertha made beadwork to sell to tourists in the Indian Village; when she was old enough, Elena was expected to help with production.

As a teen, Elena danced at the Stand Rock Indian Ceremonial, a summer performance event in a natural amphitheater among the dells of the Wisconsin River. She needed complete dance outfits so she learned from her mother and an elder women how to make appliqué ribbon skirts and blouses and many types of accessories.

Elena made her first traditional Ho Chunk dress at age 14 using silk and appliqué. Today, her daughters assist her as she designs and sews Ho Chunk, Oneida and Menominee traditional and contemporary men's and women's dress wear from buckskin or fabric. Elena also makes star quilts, important ceremonial blankets in Native communities.

In her beadwork, Elena uses cut glass beads or the more traditional seed beads. For diagonal weave hair ornaments (pah ke), "The original colors for the Blackdeer family are turquoise with black, red and white." By using them, Elena is honoring her grandmother, Nelly Blackdeer. "It's an old way, within the family."

Elena also has pushed the boundaries of tradition, using cut glass beads instead of the seed beads in her daughter's hair ornament. "It's okay to be contemporary. It's an art. It's still the traditional labor, the same pattern of our people – of my family, in fact – with just a variety of colors and beads."

In a 2011-12 apprenticeship, when Elena taught apprentice Marian Hungary moccasin making, she showed her an old pair of Ho Chunk women's moccasins, urging her to examine closely the one-piece cut, beading techniques, and style of sewing on the leather with sinew. Marian learned how to determine the direction of the hide's elasticity, measure and cut the hide, design beadwork, and finish the moccasin with a hard sole.

Elena's goal was for her apprentice to become skilled at the many dimensions involved in making moccasins "so she can help other young people in her community." Marian was motivated to learn, "Clothing is an important part of traditional life...Moccasins are a necessity when we send our loved ones on to the spirit world. I think we should all know how to make them."